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# HIGHER EDUCATION IN JAPAN: CAN THE SYSTEM CHANGE?

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## ABSTRACT

The topic for this thesis is:

### **The Reform of Higher Education in Japan- Can the System Change?**

Since the establishment of the university system in the Meiji Restoration, Japan's higher education system has been undergoing a series of changes and reforms that continue to the present day. Rapid social and economic changes and the quantitative expansion of higher education in the post-war period have greatly effected the affairs in education. There has not, however, been the same improvements in the quality of education received at the higher levels. The effects of the problems are widely reflected in the lower levels of education and society as a whole, through the increase in juvenile delinquency, violence in schools, and examination hell.

There are so many issues discussed within the reform debates that, for the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen to focus five problems that have continued to plague the Japanese Higher Education system. They are:-

- Academic credentialism- The social climate in which too much value is placed on the educational background of the individuals;
- The hierarchy of and within the institutions of higher education;
- The quality in undergraduate education and the lack of graduate education
- Selection methods: the excessive competition for university entrance examinations;
- The Control of Education by the Government.

These problem areas are interwoven with each other, each having a strong effect on the other. The complexity and interrelationship of these issues are the starting point in the attempt to understand why there has not been any solution throughout the reform efforts of the past three decades.

Various education missions and councils have all pointed out these problems and made recommendations as to how their effects could be alleviated, but still there is no

change. Between the time the recommendations are made to the time when reform measures can be implemented, something is going wrong, blocking the chance to make the substantial changes necessary to bring about higher education reform in Japan.

Although the need for reform widely recognised both inside and outside Japan, the three major reform attempts in the past (Meiji, Occupation, and 1980s Nakasone Campaign), have not been successful in eliminating the problems that remain visible into the 1990s. Although some significant changes have been made, these reform attempts have failed to solve the major problems in higher education, and in some cases they have made them more visible. In other cases they have only made conceptual changes without dealing with the fundamental issues

Education reform is now (late 1990s) a major national issue. The current reform stems from a growing sense in Japan that higher education is neither responding to new national needs in a changing world nor to the changing concerns of Japanese youth. However, the Japanese must not only deal with the problems evident in society at present, but they must also face a future with fewer students of university age due to the low birth rate and ageing population. As a result of this demographic trend, enrolments at the university will decline steadily after peaking in the early 1990s. From now on, universities will have to market themselves to potential students on the basis of specialisation and differentiation.

The purpose of my thesis is to discuss whether or not the higher education system in Japan can reform itself into one that will meet the needs of the 21st Century. By outlining the development of the five problems I mentioned above, and looking at why have previous reform attempts to solve these problems have failed, I hope to come to a conclusion as to why the reform efforts to alleviate these problems have not been successful, and ultimately answer the question “Can the System Change?”.

# CONTENTS

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>2 Japan's Higher Education System</b>	<b>10</b>
2.1 Higher Education before WWII	11
2.2 Changes Under the Allied Occupation 1945-1952	12
2.3 Post-war Higher Education	13
<b>3 The Problems</b>	<b>16</b>
3.1 Academic credentialism	16
3.1.1 The Ronin Phenomenon	20
3.2 Hierarchy	20
3.3 Poor Quality of Undergraduate Education	22
3.4 Selection Methods	25
3.4.1 University Entrance Examinations	25
3.5 Control of Education	29
3.5.1 Occupation Enforced Changes in the Role of the MOE	30
3.5.2 Post-war Control of Higher Education	32
<b>4 Actors on the Educational Reform Scene</b>	<b>35</b>
4.1 Government	36
4.1.1 The Role of the LDP	37
4.1.2 The LDP Education Zoku	38
4.1.3 The LDP Centre	40
4.2 Bureaucracy	40
4.2.1 The Ministry of Education -MOE	41
4.2.2 The MOE Place in the Process	42
4.2.3 The MOE as a 'Neutral' Bureaucracy dealing with the Zoku	43
4.2.4 MOE and Education Zoku Co-operation	44
4.3 Big Business/ Industry	44
4.4 Opposition Forces- The Progressives	47
4.4.1 Political Opposition	47
4.4.2 The Teacher's Unions	48
4.5 The Neo-Conservatives	50
4.6 Society	51
<b>5 Questionnaire</b>	<b>54</b>
5.1 Problems in Higher Education Today	55
5.2 The Purpose of the University	58
5.3 Quality of Higher Education	61
5.4 Selection Methods	63

5.5 Control of Higher Education	66
5.6 Tuition and Funding at Japanese Universities	67
5.7 Hierarchy	69
5.8 Factors Hindering Education Reform	70
<b>6 Education Reform Efforts</b>	<b>76</b>
6.1 The Third Round of Reforms	76
6.1.1 National Council on Education Reform –NCER	79
6.1.2 Hashimoto Administration	81
6.2 The University Council	82
6.3 The Ongoing Reform of Higher Education	84
6.3.1 Towards More Distinctive Higher Education	85
6.4 The Five Major Problems	86
6.4.1 Academic Credentialism	86
6.4.2 Hierarchy	86
6.4.3 Poor Quality of Higher Education	88
6.4.3.1 Improved Educational Methods	90
6.4.4 Selection Methods	91
6.4.4.1 University Entrance Examinations	92
6.4.4.2 Improvement of the System of Admission on Recommendation	94
6.4.5 Control of Education	96
<b>7 Concluding Observations</b>	<b>99</b>
7.1 Implementation	102
7.2 The Problems	103
7.2.1 Academic Credentialism	103
7.2.2 Hierarchy	104
7.2.3 Poor Quality of Undergraduate Education	105
7.2.4 Selection Methods	106
7.2.5 Control of Education	107
7.3 Can the System Change?	108
<b>8 Bibliography</b>	<b>113</b>
8.1 Books	113
8.2 Articles	117
8.3 Internet Sites	120
<b>9 Appendices</b>	<b>121</b>
Appendix One	Historical Context in which Higher Education in Japan Developed
Appendix Two	Recruitment Procedures in Japan.
Appendix Three	Questionnaire (English and Japanese Versions).
	121
	143
	146

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

Japan is a country without many natural resources except for its people. School and higher education is the means to cultivate and refine this resource. As a result the education system has been considered by many the key to economic growth and political stability. Investment in education has significance both at the national level and the personal level. The state has sought over the past 100 years to create a system which could produce an effective workforce to lead the country's drive for modernisation, whereas for the individual, education is the key to social status and financial security<sup>1</sup>. Japanese society is education-minded to an extraordinary degree: success in formal education is considered largely synonymous with success in life, and for most students, almost the only path to social and economic status.

Higher education in Japan began when the Meiji Government in 1877 established the first Western-style institution, Tokyo University. Since then Japan has become one of the most highly educated countries in the world. Yet Japan's education system of today is not one to be envied. Rapid social and economic changes and the quantitative expansion of higher education in the post-war period have greatly effected the affairs in education. A variety of problems have been exposed within the higher education system which include:

- the social climate in which too much emphasis is placed on the educational background of the individuals; the hierarchy of and within the institutions of higher education;
- the excessive competition for university entrance examinations;
- the uniform and inflexible structure and methods of formal education; and
- the poor quality of undergraduate education and the lack of graduate education.<sup>2</sup>

These problems are widely reflected in the lower levels of education and society as a whole, through the increase in juvenile delinquency, violence in schools, and examination hell.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Individuals in Japan are nowadays ranked largely according to their educational background rather than their family standing.

<sup>2</sup> Mombusho Home Page <http://www.monbu.go.jp> Education Reform



When we talk of higher education, we are referring to education beyond secondary schooling in some form of higher educational institution such as a university, college, polytechnic, and so on. The Higher Education Encyclopaedia states: *“Higher education influences and is influenced by the culture in which it is embedded. It is shaped by society and it helps shape society. It requires resources and it contributes resources- in the form of qualified members of the workforce, better citizens, and the discovery of useful and other worthwhile knowledge. It is an important guardian of a nation’s cultural tradition and it is among its sternest critics. It must respond to the demands of society and it must stand aloof from the whims of current fashion”*.<sup>4</sup>

In Japan, institutions of higher education include universities (daigaku), junior college (tanki daigaku), technical colleges (koto semmon gakkoo) and special training schools (senshu gakkoo). The School Education Law (SEL) of 1947 describes the aim of the university as being to teach and study higher learning as well as to give students broad general culture and intellectual, moral and practical abilities. The junior college may lay emphasis on the training of abilities necessary for vocational and practical life. The technical colleges aims at teaching specialised arts as well as cultivating vocational abilities.<sup>5</sup>

The higher education system in Japan is centred on the universities, which enrol over 80% of all students in higher education. The university is defined as a centre of broad general culture, higher learning and technical arts, and for the development of intellectual, moral, and practical qualities. It is authorised to add a graduate school and to offer evening, extension and correspondence courses. It is opened to men and women who had acquired a secondary education or its equivalent, while the graduate school was opened to those who graduated university or having equivalent schooling.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> These problems cause great concern for the Japanese people whose society is based on group harmony. Many people view these problems to be the result of the failing education system, but Beauchamp points out that some observers see these problems emerging in today’s Japan as nothing more than ‘advanced nation’s disease’ (senshinkoku-byo), the inevitable, if alarming results of modern industrial society: increases in rates of divorce, juvenile crime, school violence and other social ills associated with countries like the US. – Beauchamp and Vardaman, 1994 pg 28

<sup>4</sup> Clark, Neave 1992 pg 841

<sup>5</sup> Kobayashi, 1976 pg 142

<sup>6</sup> *Outline of Education in Japan*, Ministry of Education, Science And Culture, 1991 pg 83

The purpose of higher education is to produce specialists in a variety of fields to prepare people for their working life and for them to make the greatest contribution to society that they can. *“One of the main connections between a higher education system and the society in which it operates is the provision of graduates in a variety of specialities and, since it takes several years to produce graduates, and the subject and curricula of higher institutions needs to be relatively stable over time, there is an intrinsic need for higher education policy makers to take a forward look at the labour force situation”.*<sup>7</sup> This is one policy area that the government in Japan has failed to improve since the end of the rapid economic growth in the immediate post-war decades.

Universities have a two-fold object: study and education. However, the phenomenon of mass education at the university level in Japan seems to be changing the university into a place for education only. This is because of the inadequacy of conditions of study in terms of material and personnel. In Japan, education has become a mechanism for providing general education to the masses, with the bulk of the specialist training going on partly in the underdeveloped graduate schools, but predominantly in the industrial companies in Japan. The function of higher education for the training of specialists has all but been lost.

The Japanese higher education system, particularly the universities, has been widely criticised by both Western and Japanese scholars alike. William Cummings states that *“The functions of the Japanese university are increasingly being performed by alternate institutions. Increasing proportions of Japan’s basic research, and virtually all applied research are being performed in the laboratories of industry and government. ‘In-service’ training and the provision of opportunity for exceptional students to study overseas is an alternative method of providing advanced professional education.”*<sup>8</sup>

Cutts<sup>9</sup> writes *“On one thing nearly all can agree: Higher education in Japan today is in crisis. Its producing graduates for the wrong future, taught by professors who are*

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<sup>7</sup> Clark, Neave, 1992 pg 845

<sup>8</sup> William Cummings cited Patience, 1984 pg 206

<sup>9</sup> Cutts, 1997 pg 58-59

*indifferent, and it is failing in providing society with the enlightenment, knowledge and energy it will need to meet internal and external hazards that loom...the deficiencies on campus and in faculty circles, not only threaten to leave the country with a leadership incapable of meeting global challenges that are already appearing, but they may well be irreparable”.*

Michio Nagai (Minister of Education, Japan 1984) states that “*Japanese students work hard until they get into university, but from there on what is expected is to get a degree rather than an education*”.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone based a large proportion of his 1984 election campaign on education reform, stating in his Formal Request of Education Reform, September 5<sup>th</sup>, 1984 “*We are no longer without problems...I believe new situations, requiring reform, have arisen along with the passage of time over our 40 year post-war history*”.<sup>11</sup>

The foreign and Japanese observers are quick to criticise the system, and yet reports both from inside and outside Japan tend to offer up ideals, without offering up the means to achieve these ideals. Regardless of the criticisms, however, it cannot be denied that the education system has many strengths. The Japanese education system is very highly regarded in the international community, with many Western governments believing that the education system in Japan holds the key to unlocking the secrets of Japan’s phenomenal post-war economic success. Although the system of education can be deemed a ‘success’ it can be clearly seen from the problems in society and the pressure on Japanese youths, that improvements definitely need to be made.

Not only must the Japanese deal with the problems evident in society at present, but they must also face a future with less students of university age due to the low birth rate and ageing population. As a result of this demographic trend, enrolments at the university will decline steadily after peaking in the early 1990s, and universities will have to market themselves to potential students on the basis of specialisation and

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<sup>10</sup> Michio Nagai cited Kiyota, 1971 pg 3

<sup>11</sup> Kawamura, 1985 pg 12

differentiation. It will be necessary to attract older adults who did not receive higher education in their youth but are now eager to continue their education.

The evils within the system are well documented in a number of critical reports.<sup>12</sup> These reports naturally differed in their approaches to the problems, in their analyses and their recommendations regarding them. They were, however, in agreement in pointing out that radical reforms are needed in Japanese education in order to meet the expansion of knowledge, the development of technical innovation, the increasing complexity of society and the changes in national and international life.<sup>13</sup>

Although the need for reform widely recognised both inside and outside Japan, the three major reform attempts in the past (Meiji, Occupation, and 1980s Nakasone Campaign), have not been successful in eliminating the problems that remain visible into the 1990s. Although some significant changes have been made, these reform attempts have failed to solve the major problems in higher education, in some cases only enhanced them more, or only made conceptual changes without dealing with the fundamental issues. Various education missions and councils have all pointed out the same problems and made recommendations as to how these problems could be alleviated, but still there is no change. Between the time the recommendations are made to the time when reform measures can be implemented, something is going wrong, blocking the chance to make the substantial changes necessary to bring about higher education reform in Japan.

Higher education has seen a succession of reforms since the mid-1980s, and after gaining considerable momentum over the past few years, education reform is now a major national issue. The current reform interest differs from that in the earlier periods in that it has not been precipitated by a major breakdown in the system or by a strong demand from the corporate sector for improvement. Rather, it stems from a growing sense in Japan that higher education is neither responding to new national needs in a changing world nor to the changing concerns of Japanese youth.

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<sup>12</sup> such as the 1971 OECD report on Japanese education, the 1984 Ad Hoc Council on Education report, and various reports produced by business and industry leaders in Japan.

<sup>13</sup> Kobayashi, 1980 pg 239

The reform movement faces many obstacles. Some fundamental education issues are at stake in a time of growing economic constraint, and deeply rooted tradition, status systems and vested interests are being challenged in the process. Any reforms that may be implemented are likely to have important implications for secondary and even elementary education as well.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of this thesis is to discuss whether or not the higher education system in Japan can reform itself into one that will meet the needs of the 21st Century. I will look at five of the major problem areas that continue to be a thorn in the side of Japanese higher education, how they developed throughout the course of the development of higher education in Japan and why previous reform attempts to solve these problems have failed. This will include an outline of the historical context in which higher education developed and a discussion on the major influences in the government, education circles and society who block the reform attempts both in the past and today.

The discussion will focus mainly on the university sector, and will only incorporate other sectors if further explanation or comparison is required. The five problem areas I will look at are

- academic credentialism;
- hierarchy of and within institutions;
- poor quality of undergraduate education;
- selection procedures (entrance examinations); and
- the control of higher education by the Japanese government (particularly the MOE).

These problem areas are interwoven with each other, each having a strong effect on the other. For example, academic credentialism facilitates the competition for entrance examinations, which is made tougher by the desire to get into the top schools in the national hierarchy. The complexity of the problems is the starting point in understanding why there has not been any solution throughout the reform efforts of the past three decades.

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<sup>14</sup> [http://timss.enc.org/TIMSS/addtools/pubs/124016/4016\\_49.htm](http://timss.enc.org/TIMSS/addtools/pubs/124016/4016_49.htm) pg 10